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Books, Books, Books

Ted L. Estess

The University of Houston

Just after 9 p.m., I climbed aboard a Continental Trailways bus and stared through green glass as my parents watched the second of their two sons head off to college. Leaving the station, the bus moved into the bayous of south Louisiana along old Highway 90, then over the swamps and across rice and sugar cane fields and on through a night of small towns, finally climbing the Sabine River bridge into Texas, where a mileage marker announced *New Mexico 878 miles*. That should give any young man enough room.

The bus stopped at 5 a.m. at a larger Trailways station where I was to get the seven o'clock to Waco. After a modest breakfast, I examined the racks of paperback books, thinking this the proper thing for an aspiring young scholar to do. I overcame my shyness to make two purchases: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and another august volume, author unknown, entitled *Sex and the Adolescent*.

Bought for fifty cents each in the Trailways bus station in Houston, Texas, the two new books doubled the size of my library. Stowed in my trunk in the belly of the bus was a Webster's dictionary that had lain, largely unused, around the house for thirty years; and in a black plastic folder at my side was a handsome Bible, red letter edition, a leather-bound high school graduation gift with my name embossed in gold on its flexible cover.

There were not many books in my house in Tylertown, Mississippi. My parents prized education but didn't buy books. But as I was soon to learn, I had somehow managed to read about as many as most of my Baylor University classmates, which, in the fall of 1960, was not saying a great deal.

Settled back into the Trailways seat, I glanced first at Carnegie, who, I quickly discovered, had nothing whatsoever to teach me about winning friends and influencing people. Whatever deficiencies I was carrying to the halls of academe, I was not lacking the capacities requisite to endear myself to others. All you have to do is say *Hello* and ask a question or two, and people will take you to be a lodestone of generosity and goodwill. Sit me down by a stranger on a bus bound for any place, and, in no time, I'll win a friend and influence a people.

But sex is another matter. It was from a state of some wonder that I expectedly turned the pages of *Sex and the Adolescent* as the Trailways moved through Waller and Hempstead deep into the heart of Texas. A curious woman in the seat opposite leaned over to see what I was reading, but I shielded the book from her. I didn't want to hurt my reputation. Long before I had heard of Evelyn Woods and speed-reading, I read fast.

When I stepped out of the yellow cab and stood for the first time in front of Kokernot Hall on the campus of Baylor University, I could not foresee that four years hence I would drive away from that place, alone in my first car, a '58 black Custom

Ford with overdrive, and that there they would be—on the seats and in the trunk, surrounding the spare tire, and in the glove compartment, stuffed in every crevice—there they would be, hundreds of them, books, books, books on every subject, but especially novels and plays and poetry, theology and philosophy, history and comparative religion.

And in September of 1960, neither could I foresee that four years hence I would have read nigh all of William Faulkner, and would have spent days with King Lear, and would have found I could not understand philosophers named Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, and would have been kept alive by a theologian named Paul Tillich and a storyteller named Eudora Welty, and that I would have taken a liking to Eastern stuff, would even have fancied myself becoming a Zen Buddhist and meditating for fourteen hours a day.

And when I drove out of Texas in the summer of 1964, I could not then foresee that four years later, I would drive away again, this time from Louisville, Kentucky, and this time with a beautiful young wife named Sybil, who by then would have taught me considerably more than I could ever have hoped to learn from that slender volume I purchased in 1960 in the Trailways station in Houston, Texas, and it wasn't about winning friends and influencing people either.

But driving away from Kentucky in 1968, the new Chevy Nova couldn't hold them all. I had to call up Mayflower. It was with some pride that I responded to the fellow who was loading the dozens of boxes onto that moving van when he said to me, *Son, you got more books than any man I ever seed. Whada you do wid all des books?*

And I replied, *I read 'em, Sir.*

And he said, *Son, don't mess wid me. Ain't no man gonna read des many books.*

Arriving at Syracuse University, I wasn't sure why my teacher in Kentucky had told me to go north to study. Maybe he thought it would be good for me to meet people who were different from me, to encounter, as we say now in the university, difference, to live awhile with diversity.

To tell the truth, going to Syracuse in 1968, I tried not to be different. I sometimes tried to disguise where I had come from. I took up pipe smoking with a vengeance and started trying to talk right. I had bought my first pipe a few years earlier in Louisville. My philosophy teacher there, an Englishman named Eric Rust, had studied at Oxford and had read everything I wanted to read, and he smoked a pipe. He could also talk right. I went out to his house one day and we talked about my paper on Tillich. Surrounded by books in several languages and sitting in a room filled with the incense of sweet tobacco, he was just the kind of man I wanted to be. All I needed to do was to buy a pipe, read lots of books, and change the way I talked. That seemed easy enough to do.

So I bought a five dollar pipe at a store on 4th Street in Louisville, and sat out under the great maple tree that shaded Sybil's and my balcony at our apartment in a grand old house on South Peterson Street, reading books and smoking my pipe. The nice thing about a pipe is that you can spend the best part of an afternoon just getting ready to light the thing.

After a year or two, I got pretty good at smoking that pipe, and I read a lot more books, but I still didn't talk right. I tried to remember to add *g* to words like talking, fixing, reading. So instead of saying, *I wuz talkin' to my teacher, and I told him*

I wuz fixin' to do sum readin' this summer, I tried real hard to say, I wuz talking to my teacher, and I told him I wuz fixing to do sum reading this summer.

Trying to talk right was one of the hardest things I ever tried to do. Living in Syracuse, New York, was a benefit in that regard, because in Syracuse, everybody talked right, except me and Sybil, and we were trying to. After a few weeks, I stopped saying *thang* and *Fridee*, and started saying *thing* and *Friday*. It's amazing how much better you feel when you talk right.

I was doing pretty well until one night in Atlanta, Georgia. I was there for a meeting and heard a theologian named Tom Altizer give a speech. Back then Altizer was pretty famous and I knew him a bit, and at the reception after the talk, he introduced me to his sister. She was, as I recall, a linguist who taught at the University of Hawaii. We were talking pretty good, and I thought I was sounding all right when she stopped right in the middle of the conversation and asked, *Where in the world are you from?*

Well, originally I'm from Mississippi, I mumbled. Back then, I always said I was *originally* from Mississippi, just to show that I had come up in the world. But I quickly added, *I've lived four years in Texas, four in Kentucky, and a couple in Syracuse, New York,* speaking more clearly the further north I went on the list.

Well, you really have messed up the way you talk, she said. *You speak with a little of this accent and a little of that one. It's terrible, and very unpleasant to listen to. I think you should talk like people talk in Mississippi. It's a beautiful way to talk.*

I didn't hear anything else she said the rest of the night. Here I had bought a pipe and was getting along toward talking right and this little woman from Hawaii was suggesting I was on the wrong track. She probably wouldn't have liked my pipe either, but I didn't tell her about that.

Perhaps, then, I needed to go north not to encounter something different, but in order to see myself as different, and to see the place I had come from as different, maybe special. Getting away from my own place, perhaps I would be able to see it as the place it is, and see myself as well.

But, frankly, I went to Syracuse, New York, trying hard to become something else. Whatever I was, was not enough. Perhaps it was not even good. I didn't talk right and everybody on TV seemed to think that my kind of folks lynched Blacks folks and were ignorant. I was Ross Barnett and George Wallace and Bull Connor.

Do you know any people who kill Negroes? a woman asked me one day at a gift shop in Cazenovia, New York. I was browsing in the shop, and she was making small talk with a stranger whom she had just met. She wanted to know where my accent came from. I had said *originally from Mississippi*, and she asked her question just to make conversation. The question just popped in her mind. No insult intended.

I felt accused and guilty and didn't know quite what to say. *Not more than two or three hundred,* I said. I walked out, feeling worse for having gone to Cazenovia on a beautiful spring day.

But as is often the case, you don't really know why you go to a place until you've been there for a while. You go for one reason, only later to discover the real reason.

The real reason—at least one of the real reasons—I went to Syracuse, New York, was to become a Mississippian. There was nothing else for me to be in Syracuse, New York.

All this reminds me of the trips that Sybil and I made to Mississippi from Syracuse. Whenever we got back to Syracuse after a couple of weeks in Mississippi, folks would want to have us over for dinner. I thought this was mighty nice until I realized our hosts wanted not so much to see Sybil and me, but to hear us talk about Mississippi. They wanted to see us *because* we had been to Mississippi and had returned. To them, Mississippi wasn't the planet Pluto, but it was in the neighborhood.

Take our friends Tom and Ellen Ewens. They would plan for weeks to have Sybil and me to dinner as soon as we got back from a few weeks in the South. Tom would lay in plenty of food and drink, and put on a fine meal. For three or four hours, Sybil and I would tell Mississippi stories, and Tom and Ellen would listen as though we had just arrived from outer space.

Tom, I said one night, trotting out my best Mississippi drawl, *Sybil and I wuz coming up from Poplarville the other day, and we decided to stay off the Interstate. Decided to come up on old Highway 11.*

Is dat the same highway 11 dat cums to Syracuse, Tom asked, trying himself to talk with a proper Southern accent, but he should have known a man from Wisconsin can't talk right.

The very one, I said. *It starts in Nawleens and goes right through Poplarville, not a hundred yards from Sybil's house. Well, anyway, we wuz moseying along Highway 11, and got up above Nashville, Tennessee, headed toward Bristol and Kingsport, and it wuz getting along toward dark, and we wuz getting worried about finding a place to stay. So I stopped at this old garage to ask if there wuz any places to stay at on up toward Bristol. "Howdy," I said to the mechanic in the garage. "I'm driving north on Highway 11. Can I get a place to stay at on up the road?"*

"Why, man," the mechanic replied, "that-air road runs all the way to New York City. You can git a place to stay at wherever you wants to on that-air road."

And at that, Tom and Ellen Ewens fell out laughing.

Now, you tell me, why would my friend Tom Ewens and his wife Ellen, he from Wisconsin, a philosopher and a psychoanalyst, and she an accomplished Montessori teacher from Rhode Island, nigh split their sides laughing when I told them that story? It's not *that* funny. Tom got up to get something else for the table, repeating the very words to himself as he walked to the kitchen, *Why, man, that-air road runs all the way to New York City*. He went on laughing just to hear the words, *That-air roads runs all the way to New York City*.

Perhaps the real reason I went to Syracuse was to meet Tom and Ellen Ewens, and obviously I couldn't have known that before I went. Meeting them did not make me something else, but it did change me. It made me more truly what I am. At least I started paying attention to my place and people. For me, it was going north toward home.

It reminds me of a story, a Jewish story. Rebbe Zusia once said, *When I die, the Celestial Judge will not ask why I was not Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob. The Celestial Judge will ask why I was not Zusia.*

But I didn't go to Syracuse, New York, with all that in mind. I went to do serious research in religion and literature. To tell the truth, being serious was more important than religion and literature. They were only the vehicles by which I exercised what was most important: my seriousness.

Perhaps that it why Steve Langfur and I became good friends. Like me, Langfur

had a terminal case of seriousness. He looked like a refugee from a Bergman movie or a Samuel Beckett play, gaunt and somber, dark and isolated. He was a man floating alone on an iceberg in the middle of the North Sea. Repeatedly, he narrowed his eyes, which were hardly visible beneath his black and bushy eyebrows. He was a philosopher on leave from the *Schwartzwald*—the Black Forest—and he had overdosed on that book by Martin Heidegger called *Being and Time*—*Sein und Zeit*.

Later, Langfur would take his new wife, a Sabra from Israel and a bundle of Middle Eastern passion if there ever was one, up to a Vermont mountain shack and stash himself away to read nothing but Martin Heidegger. *Sorge*—concern, care—that was one of Heidegger's big words. Langfur was full of *Sorge*, serious *Sorge*, ultimate *Sorge*, as Paul Tillich would have it.

And so was I: full of it. It was hard to tell which of us was the fuller of it. Langfur's German was better than mine, but I was as full of *Sorge*.

Back then I had the idea that in order to say much of anything about a thinker I needed to read everything he or she had written. Not a bad plan for an eager young scholar, I suppose, but such a plan ill fits a man for ordinary life. You don't have time to take out the garbage or be a decent husband or vote if you set about to read—as I did—all of Paul Tillich, Martin Heidegger, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, and many lesser lights, including W. H. Auden, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Eugene O'Neill, John Updike, James Baldwin, Joseph Heller, Tennessee Williams, Ralph Ellison, William Styron, Philip Wheelwright, Suzanne Langer, Hannah Arendt, Norman O. Brown, and Herbert Marcuse, with Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx thrown in for good measure. And that is not to mention the Bible, Luther, Augustine, Schleiermacher, and, the best of the lot, Miss Eudora Welty.

What surprises me now is not that I was captive to such a program of study, but that I was so successful, if that is the word, in following it. But I couldn't keep it up.

Looking back, I see I made a fundamental mistake with regard to books. For one thing, I probably read too many. In that, I wasn't much different from most eager young scholars who get hooked on books. Even Voltaire said he read too many books, Nietzsche, too.

Now I'm all for reading. I spend the best part of my waking hours cajoling my teenage son and my students to read books, and I still read a fair number myself. But too many books can pretty near ruin a man, or a woman for that matter.

Some people suggest that women are somehow inoculated against the mischief that too many books can cause. They say that women are less inclined to abstraction, that they are more connected with others and more, as they say, *relational* in their way of thinking and living. I don't know about all that, but I do know that too many books can ruin a good woman as fast as they can a good man. Too many books—at least too many books read in the wrong way—can distance a person from ordinary life. Too many books read in the wrong way can take you clean out of the space and time of your own life.* After ten or twelve years of doing little more than reading books, you will hardly be able to find your way around a city block and will barely know the time of day.

*In *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy's character Binx Bolling speaks of the "danger of slipping clean out of space and time" (New York: Ivy Books, 1961), p. 64.

Take my friend Steve Langfur. Langfur took his hearty young wife off to a shack on the side of a mountain in Vermont with little more for company than a potbellied stove and a stack of books by Martin Heidegger, in German, too. Langfur spent the best part of two years reading Martin Heidegger and chopping wood. After he moved to Israel, Langfur wrote me one time that he had discovered his element. He said his element was the sun.

That's what locking yourself up in a shack in Vermont and reading Martin Heidegger will do to you: you'll be thirty-five years old before you notice the sun.

But reading too many books was only part of the problem. I read books in the wrong way. I thought that reading books is like climbing Mount Ida. Mount Ida is a 12,000 foot peak just north of where Sybil and I spend time in the summer in Colorado. When I am out there, I sometimes think I might climb Mount Ida one day. I could drive up the road about 10 miles, hike up Timber Lake trail, and after five hours or so, I would be at the summit of Mount Ida. A strenuous walk, but possible for a paunchy man like myself.

In Syracuse, I thought that reading Paul Tillich, or anyone else, was like climbing Mount Ida. You get on the trail; walk up the slope; reach the summit; smoke your pipe; and come back down. Then you move on to another mountain. There are always more peaks in the distance. They are like scoops of ice cream on an infinitely high cone.

But we know that reading Paul Tillich or William Faulkner or Emily Dickinson is not like climbing Mount Ida. Doing x-ray crystallography or working out a computer-aided design are, in many ways, not like climbing Mount Ida either.

They rather are like getting to know a face. There is no summit to a face. You cannot conquer a face. I can never say I am finished and done with Sybil's face. It changes day to day, hence my knowing of her is always partial, incomplete. My teacher Stanley Hopper, following Nietzsche, would call my knowing of her *perspectival*.

Now my teachers Stanley Hopper and David Miller could have taught me all this, and I suppose they tried. But, in fact, I was doing precisely what they had done. They too had worked, and nearly succeeded, at reading every book that had been written in about five fields, theology, psychology, philosophy, literature, mythology, and so forth. And when I was studying with them, they added Eastern texts to the list, so I set about to smoke my pipe and read the *Dhammapada*, the *Rig Veda*, the *Tao te Ching*, and *The Analects of Confucius*. You can add the *Bhagavad-Gita* and parts of the *Upanishads* as well.

My mind was like a garbage can. I was tossing everything in as fast as possible. It's a wonder I got out with an ounce of sanity left. Sybil says I didn't. I tell you what I was. I was a Laputan. You remember the Laputans. They are those folks who live on that floating island called Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels*. The Laputans are so taken up in excessive speculation that they are like their island home, floating above reality. In fact, they are so engrossed in thought that they forget where they are; and if they are not careful, they'll fall in a hole or walk right off the island. Gulliver says that they can neither speak or hear the speech of others "without being roused by a some external taction upon [their] organs of speech and hearing."

The Laputans need the help of a Flapper. The Flapper holds a stick to which is attached a slightly inflated balloon filled with peas or pebbles. When the Laputan falls dangerously deep into thought, the Flapper takes the little balloon and flaps it

against the eyes and ears of the Laputan. The Flapper brings the Laputan out of thought and back to his senses. For a while, the Laputan recovers himself in the space and time of his own life.

For a few years in Syracuse, New York, I was a Laputan and Sybil was my Flapper. Unless she roused my organs of speech and hearing with some external tactions, I was mostly deaf and dumb as a fence post.

Perhaps that was why my teacher in Kentucky told me to go north to study: he knew I needed to learn to pay attention to things right before my eyes—to learn more fully to inhabit the spaces and times of my own life.

To tell you the truth, I've spent the best part of the last twenty years unlearning a good deal of what my teachers taught me, but maybe that's the way it always is between good teachers and their students. A teacher teaches and the student learns; and then the student must unlearn what the teacher taught in order to teach someone else.

Is it necessarily the case that we must spend a good part of our life recovering from our education?

One afternoon I went out to Professor Hopper's house for a little conversation about Martin Heidegger. It was an oral exam. I was not up to Heidegger, but I had slogged up the mountain and was ready to expound on his concepts of *Da-sein*, *Geschichte*, *gegenwärtigen*, *existenzial*, and *existenzziel*. Hopper favored the later Heidegger, so I was ready to talk about poetry and the poet's special capacity to step into the clearing of being and to make present the four-fold—mortals, the earth, the sun, the gods. *That which you seek is near and is already coming to meet you*. I could quote that line from Hölderlin if need be, but I didn't know whether he wrote it before or after he went mad.

Professor Hopper met me at the door, dressed, as always, in gray suit, white shirt, and tie. We were downstairs, and there they were, everywhere. I stared at them. Books, books, books, thousands and thousands of books, covering the walls from floor to ceiling in three large basement rooms, and that was only part of his library. I stared and wanted to run out the door and go away to a shack in Vermont and smoke my pipe and read some more books before taking that exam. *Ted*, Dr. Hopper said, *would you like a cup of tea before we talk about Heidegger?*

That would be fine, Dr. Hopper, I said. We got to the kitchen, and my genial teacher started opening cabinets doors one after the other. He reminded me of Mr. Magoo looking for his glasses.

Now where does Helen keep the tea? Let me see. Ted, where would you suppose that Helen keeps the tea?

I really don't know, Dr. Hopper. Maybe there above the oven, in that little cabinet there.

Ted, you're right! Here's the tea! Now, Ted, Professor Hopper asked me, *how did you know that Helen keeps the tea above the oven?*

I don't know, Dr. Hopper. That's where Sybil and I keep the tea at our house, I guess.

Well, Ted, now let's see. Where do you think Helen keeps the kettle?

It's there, Dr. Hopper, there on the stove.

The reluctant light of the Syracuse winter came through the huge living room windows, and we talked about Martin Heidegger and poetry, and the death and rebirth of the gods. *It is the time of the god that is no more and the not yet of the*

gods that are to come, I said, quoting Heidegger who was writing of Hölderlin.

I think so, Ted, Professor Hopper said. It's like Wallace Stevens says, we live under a new dispensation of the sun. But to step into that new dispensation, we must first step back. We must step back, and then down. We must step barefoot into reality.

And I, quoting Hopper quoting Kafka, added, *It's like what Kafka said: the positive is given. The task that is laid upon us is to accomplish the negative.*

Yes, Professor Hopper replied. *That reminds me of the story that Nishitani Sensei told me when I saw him in Kyoto. You know the story. The student goes to the Master and asks, How can I be enlightened? And the Master offers him a cup of tea and starts to pour. And the student impatiently asks again, Master, How can I be enlightened? All the time, the Master is pouring tea. And the tea starts to overflow the cup. It runs out on the tatami mat. Finally, the student interrupts. Master! he says, the tea is overflowing the cup! The Master replies, You must empty the cup before it can be filled.*

There's Helen! Professor Hopper exclaimed. *Helen. Helen! Ted's here. Come here, Helen, and say hello to Ted.*

It was good to see Helen, this former church organist now displaying the first signs of what was to become severe Parkinson's. *Helen! Dr. Hopper said, Ted had to help me find the tea! I couldn't lay my hands on the tea, Helen.*

I'm not surprised, Stanley, Helen replied. *I'm really not surprised.*

Professor Hopper said I did OK on the exam, but I doubted it. I wasn't sure anything I was seeking was coming near.

When I got to our apartment that afternoon, I found myself in the kitchen, getting out the coffee grinder. I poured some of the dark, redolent Colombian beans I had bought down on Marshall Street into the grinder. I was surprised again at how much noise a coffee grinder makes and at how good fresh ground coffee smells. I got the water boiling in the kettle and fitted a filter into the pot and poured boiling water across the coffee. I watched the grounds soak up the water and heard the *slinpk*, *slinpk* of the coffee hitting the bottom of the carafe. I got out our best china and poured two cups of fine coffee. With sugar and cream and napkins on the tray, I went up to the living room just as Sybil was coming in from work.

Here, Honey, I said. *I thought you might like some coffee after your long day.*

Why thank you, Ted, Sybil said. This is the nicest thing that's happened to me all day. That coffee smells delicious.